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Book Review: Mayan Folktales

The book I chose to read was Mayan Folktales, Folklore From Lake Atitlan, Guatemala by James D Sexton. The book is a compilation of folk tales and dance dramas from 14 Maya Indian towns surrounding Lake Atitlan. The towns are currently in various stages of development and although they are not all exactly the same, they each share a general Mayan heritage. Reading this book let me experience some parts of the Mayan culture and learn about some values and beliefs.

There were about 35 stories or dances shared in the book. Some were funny while others were a bit gross or shocking but all of them were interesting. Most of the stories had similar plots. The main character would encounter some sort of problem, choose an action and then usually the action was wrong and omniscient forces would punish the character.

In the very first story for instance, a poor man ran away in the middle of the night because he could not afford a dancing dress for his daughter to participate in a mandatory dance. He was going to be put in jail but he met the *dueno*, or god, of the hill and was offered a deal. The *dueno* offered to give the poor man a brand new dress for free so long as the poor man tell no one where the dress came from. He ended up drunk that night and gave in to telling people where he got the beautiful dress. As a consequence, his daughter was swept up by the wind and taken away forever.

Through these stories or dances I got to experience a sense of what the Mayans’ valued in their community. Men were punished for lying, laziness, and disobeying rules. If women had an active role in a story, they were usually being punished for being lazy, for cheating, or for being a witch. Some were even punished for falling for tricks that others played on them.

What I thought was really interesting was that even today, in underdeveloped Indian towns, a large number of Mayans still accept traditional beliefs like: honoring *duenos*, performing *costubres*, believing in *brujas* (witches that cause misfortune and death), and believing in *nuguales* (people who also can take an animal form).

I also noticed influences of the Catholic religion. There were multiple stories of corrupt priests trying to sleep with the pretty indigenous women. There was a creation story where a man and a woman were made by God and told not to eat the food of animals. The woman gave in and ate the food and convinced the man to eat the food and then God punished them. Their punishment was that they would have to work hard to live and the animals were punished for tempting the woman by having their ability to speak taken away.

Overall, it was a great way to get a glimpse into the traditional Mayan culture.